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**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

# MALALA THE POWERFUL

The amazing true story  
of a 15-year-old girl who  
stood up to a deadly  
terrorist group **BY KRISTIN LEWIS**



**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

What makes Malala  
Yousafzai a crusader?

**O**ctober 9, 2012, was an ordinary afternoon in the Swat Valley, an area of rugged mountains and sweeping green valleys in north Pakistan.

Malala Yousafzai, 15, was sitting on a school bus with her classmates waiting to go home when two bearded gunmen appeared.



“Who is Malala?” one of the men demanded.

A feeling of terror filled the bus. And then the unthinkable happened: The gunmen opened fire. One bullet pierced Malala’s head near her left eye. Two of Malala’s friends were struck in their arms. Then the gunmen fled, leaving Malala to die.

It might be difficult to understand why anyone would try to murder an innocent girl on her way home from school, but some people in Pakistan do not view Malala for what she is: a bright and generous teenager. They see her as a deadly threat to their way of life, a person who deserves to be killed. These people—mainly young men from **rural** Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan—are members of a group called the Taliban. They believe in an extreme interpretation of Islam that most Muslim people do not agree with.

For years, the Taliban had been plotting to kill Malala. Why? Because she was not only a 15-year-old girl; she was also a crusader for girls’ right to go to school. This work had made her famous throughout Pakistan and around the world. It had also made her a target of the Taliban.

## Life Is Brutal

Malala is from Mingora, a city in the Swat Valley. It’s a gorgeous



Malala recovers in a hospital in England.

place, known for its majestic green mountains, thick forests, and mighty rivers. It was once a popular vacation spot, attracting tourists from all over the world.

In the past few years, though, it has become a war zone. Starting in 2007, the Taliban began seizing control of Swat. When the Pakistani army tried to stop them, the Taliban responded with tremendous violence. They blew up government buildings and murdered police officers. At night, Malala was often awakened by the terrifying sounds of gunfire. During the day, she frequently walked by corpses of men and women executed by the Taliban and left on the street as a warning to those who

would dare **defy** them.

The Taliban are not part of Pakistan’s government, but their forces are powerful. They operate mostly in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Those who live in areas under Taliban control are forced to follow **oppressive** religious rules. All music is banned. So are



television and movies. Democracy is seen as an offense against Islam. For women and girls, life is particularly brutal: They are not allowed to go to school, have careers, or wear makeup or bright clothing. They are not allowed to go anywhere without a male relative. Breaking these rules brings severe punishment, which may include public whipping or even execution.

Like most Pakistanis, Malala and her family do not support the Taliban’s version of Islam. Malala’s



family is, in fact, deeply religious, but the Taliban do not tolerate any form of Islam that differs from its own.

## School Ban

In January 2009, the Taliban ordered all girls' schools to close. That included Malala's school, which her father had owned for more than a decade. It was devastating news. School was one of the most important parts of Malala's life—and a luxury she never took for granted. After all, fewer than half the girls in rural Pakistan had the opportunity to receive any education at all.

Despite the Taliban's order, Malala's father decided to keep his school open. This was incredibly dangerous, especially because the Taliban were gaining popularity in Swat. Some residents saw them as a welcome alternative to Pakistan's government and military, which

have been **plagued** by corruption.

From then on, Malala and her family lived under constant threat. Across the region, hundreds of schools were being bombed. Teachers were being murdered. Malala and her classmates stopped wearing their school uniforms and began hiding their books under their clothing. Staying alive meant going to school had to be top secret. Even with these precautions, many parents felt the risk was too great. Attendance at Malala's school decreased by more than 60 percent.

But what could Malala do?

What could one girl do but watch helplessly as her freedoms were taken away?

## A Powerful Weapon

It turns out, there was something she could do. Malala possessed a weapon of her own: her voice. And she would risk everything to use it.

In 2009, she began blogging for the British Broadcasting Company's (BBC) Urdu site about what her life was like under the Taliban. (Urdu is an official language of Pakistan.) To protect her identity, she used a **pseudonym**. She wrote about her dream of becoming a doctor one day, her fears of the terrorists, and her fierce determination to get the education she needed, no matter what the Taliban did or how afraid she was.

And indeed, fear was her constant companion. "On my way from school to home I heard a man saying, 'I will kill you,'" she wrote in one blog entry. "I hastened my pace and after a while I looked back [to see] if the man was still coming behind me. But to my utter relief he was talking on his mobile and must have been threatening someone else over the phone."

The blog was an instant hit; soon, people all over the world

were reading it. Malala was helping to focus attention on what was happening in Swat. Outrage grew, and many in Pakistan and around the world criticized the Pakistani government for allowing the Taliban to become so powerful.

## A Crusade

In May 2009, the Pakistani army launched a full-scale attack against the Taliban in Swat. Along with millions of **refugees**, Malala



This girls' school in Bajaur, Pakistan, was bombed by the Taliban last year. Here, the girls attend class in the rubble.

and her family were evacuated south. The conflict lasted for three months; by August, most of the Taliban had been pushed out of the cities and into the countryside, and it was safe to go home.

After that, Malala launched a full-scale attack of her own. She became even bolder in her crusade. Her identity as the famous BBC blogger was revealed. She appeared in a *New York Times* documentary, went on television shows, and gave powerful speeches to Pakistani kids. Her message was always the same: All children deserve the right to an education.

Malala's fears of retaliation did not subside, though. When asked on a Pakistani talk show about the dangers of speaking out, she eerily described how the Taliban might come for her one day: "I think of it often and imagine the scene clearly," she said. "Even if they come to kill me, I will tell them what they are trying to do is wrong, that education is our basic right."

Malala's crusade empowered her and other girls. Her courage gave hope to thousands. It also made her a star. In 2011, the President of Pakistan awarded her the first ever National Youth Peace Prize. It seemed that everyone knew her name.

Including the Taliban.



Pakistani students in the city of Karachi hold pictures of Malala during a protest condemning the attack on her.

## Attacked

In 2010, notes began appearing under Malala's door, ordering her to give up her crusade or else. But she refused to back down, and on October 9, 2012, Taliban gunmen shot her and two others on the school bus.

The hours following the shooting were a nightmare. Malala's friends were not critically injured, but Malala was in bad shape. The bullet had destroyed her left ear and sent fragments of her skull into her brain tissue, but miraculously, she clung to life. She was flown to a hospital in Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, that specializes in traumatic brain injuries. Her family soon joined her.

The Taliban soon took credit for the assassination attempt, saying it was a warning to other girls not to

## HOW MANY KIDS DON'T GO TO SCHOOL?

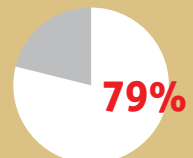
There are 1.8 billion school-aged kids in the world. The 55.5 million in the U.S. have access to free public education. In other parts of the world, not everyone is so fortunate.

**61 MILLION**  
primary school-age kids do not go to school

**71 MILLION**  
adolescents do not go to school



of out-of-school children in South and West Asia are girls



of out-of-school children in North Africa are girls



**1 in 5**

15- to 24-year-olds in developing countries\* have not completed primary school

\*A developing country is one in which most people are poor and there is not yet much industry.

follow Malala's example.

Meanwhile, the world waited, tense and furious. The United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education immediately started a petition, calling on the President of Pakistan to make a place in school for every girl. Soon 1 million people had signed. Cards flooded Malala's hospital room. In Pakistan, millions lifted up prayers for her. Candlelight **vigils** were held across the globe. Protesters marched, many of them kids carrying signs that read "I Am Malala." It seemed that by trying to silence her, the Taliban had **unwittingly** helped thousands more find a voice of their own.

### To Serve Humanity

It's been nearly a year since the shooting, and in many ways, Malala's life has changed dramatically. The bullet severely damaged her hearing and fractured her skull, causing her brain to swell dangerously. Fortunately, the physicians in Birmingham were able to control the swelling. Over the past months, she has undergone several operations to repair her skull and improve her hearing. In the meantime,

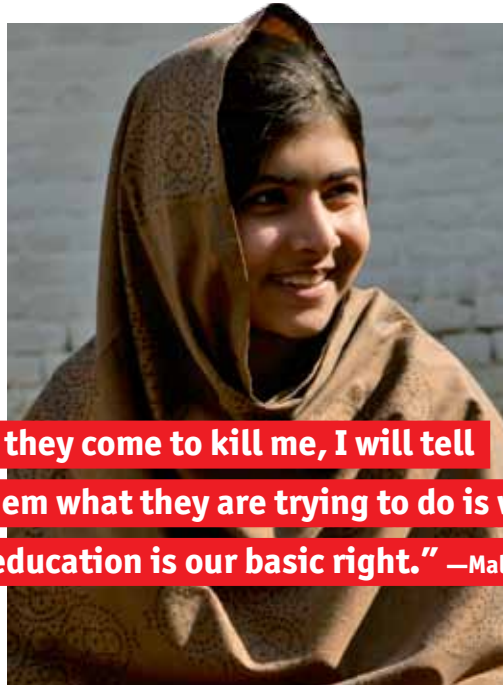
Malala's father has been given a job that enables the family to remain in the U.K., where, hopefully, they will be safe from the Taliban, who have vowed to come after Malala again.

Today, Malala has become a powerful symbol of the struggle so many kids face. Some 132 million children and teens around the world do not attend school, often because they must work to help support their families or because they have no school to go to. Malala hopes to change that. She **envisions** a world in which all children, and especially girls, can get the education they need to become whatever they want—from doctors

and scientists to politicians and journalists.

In one of her first public statements after the shooting, Malala stated that she felt her role was to "serve humanity." This fall, she will publish a memoir. The Malala Fund, created in her name, is helping to send 40 girls in Pakistan to school. (For their protection, the girls' names and the name and location of the school have not been disclosed.) There is talk that Malala should run for President someday.

For now, though, she is getting the one thing she has always wanted. Last March, she started high school in Birmingham. On her first day, she addressed a news crew. There were signs that she had not yet fully recovered—her mouth drooped slightly when she spoke and there were scars on the side of her face. But her voice was clear, her eyes shining. She pointed to her jacket. "Today, I am wearing a uniform," she said proudly. "It is important, because it proves that I am a student. It is the happiest day for me because I am living my life, I am going to school, I am learning." ●



### WRITING CONTEST

A crusade is a campaign to change something. What makes Malala a crusader? What impact has her crusade had? Write two paragraphs answering both questions. Support your claims with details from the text. Send your response to **MALALA CONTEST**. Authors of the best five essays will each have a \$100 donation made in their names to the Malala Fund. They will also receive *Words in the Dust* by Trent Reedy. See page 2 for details.

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